

wilson, woodrow, pres. of The U.S.

Labor and the War

President Wilson's Address to the
American Federation of Labor



Delivered at Buffalo, N. Y., November 12, 1917

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION

The Secretary of State

The Secretary of War

The Secretary of the Navy

George Creel

Labor and the War

ADDRESS DELIVERED BY PRESIDENT WILSON TO
THE CONVENTION OF THE AMERICAN FED-
ERATION OF LABOR, AT BUFFALO, N. Y.,
NOVEMBER 12, 1917.

*Mr. President, Delegates of the American
Federation of Labor, Ladies and Gentlemen:*

I esteem it a great privilege and a real honor to be thus admitted to your public counsels. When your executive committee paid me the compliment of inviting me here, I gladly accepted the invitation because it seems to me that this, above all other times in our history, is the time for common counsel, for the drawing together not only of the energies but of the minds of the Nation. I thought that it was a welcome opportunity for disclosing to you some of the thoughts that have been gathering in my mind during the last momentous months.

CRITICAL TIME IN HISTORY

I am introduced to you as the President of the United States, and yet I would be pleased if you would put the thought of the

U.S. - Hist. - War, war etc
war, war etc. - labor
office into the background and regard me as one of your fellow citizens who has come here to speak, not the words of authority, but the words of counsel; the words which men should speak to one another who wish to be frank in a moment more critical perhaps than the history of the world has ever yet known; a moment when it is every man's duty to forget himself, to forget his own interest, to fill himself with the nobility of a great national and world conception, and act upon a new platform elevated above the ordinary affairs of life and lifted to where men have views of the long destiny of mankind.

I think that in order to realize just what this moment of counsel is it is very desirable that we should remind ourselves just how this war came about and just what it is for. You can explain most wars very simply, but the explanation of this is not so simple. Its roots run deep into all the obscure soils of history, and in my view this is the last decisive issue between the old principles of power and the new principles of freedom.

WAR STARTED BY GERMANY

The war was started by Germany. Her authorities deny that they started it, but I am willing to let the statement I have just made await the verdict of history. And the

controlled in large measure by the German Government itself.

But that did not satisfy the German Government. All the while there was lying behind its thought in its dreams of the future a political control which would enable it in the long run to dominate the labor and the industry of the world. They were not content with success by superior achievement; they wanted success by authority. I suppose very few of you have thought much about the Berlin-to-Bagdad railway. The Berlin-Bagdad railway was constructed in order to run the threat of force down the flank of the industrial undertakings of half a dozen other countries; so that when German competition came in it would not be resisted too far, because there was always the possibility of getting German armies into the heart of that country quicker than any other armies could be got there.

Look at the map of Europe now! Germany in thrusting upon us again and again the discussion of peace, talks about what? Talks about Belgium; talks about northern France; talks about Alsace-Lorraine. Well, those are deeply interesting subjects to us and to them, but they are not talking about the heart of the matter. Take the map and look at it. Germany has absolute control of Austria-Hungary, practical control of the

Balkan States, control of Turkey, control of Asia Minor. I saw a map in which the whole thing was printed in appropriate black the other day, and the black stretched all the way from Hamburg to Bagdad—the bulk of German power inserted into the heart of the world. If she can keep that, she has kept all that her dreams contemplated when the war began. If she can keep that, her power can disturb the world as long as she keeps it, always provided, for I feel bound to put this proviso in—always provided the present influences that control the German Government continue to control it. I believe that the spirit of freedom can get into the hearts of Germans and find as fine a welcome there as it can find in any other hearts, but the spirit of freedom does not suit the plans of the pan-Germans. Power can not be used with concentrated force against free peoples if it is used by free people.

INSIDIOUS PEACE INTRIGUES

You know how many intimations come to us from one of the Central Powers that it is more anxious for peace than the chief Central Power, and you know that it means that the people in that Central Power know that if the war ends as it stands they will in effect themselves be vassals of Germany,

notwithstanding that their populations are compounded of all the peoples of that part of the world, and notwithstanding the fact that they do not wish in their pride and proper spirit of nationality to be so absorbed and dominated. **Germany is determined that the political power of the world shall belong to her.** There have been such ambitions before. They have been in part realized, but **never before have those ambitions been based upon so exact and precise and scientific a plan of domination.**

May I not say that it is amazing to me that any group of persons should be so ill-informed as to suppose, as some groups in Russia apparently suppose, that any reforms planned in the interest of the people can live in the presence of a Germany powerful enough to undermine or overthrow them by intrigue or force? **Any body of free men that compounds with the present German Government is compounding for its own destruction.** But that is not the whole of the story. Any man in America or anywhere else that supposes that the free industry and enterprise of the world can continue if the pan-German plan is achieved and German power fastened upon the world is as fatuous as the dreamers in Russia. **What I am opposed to is not the feeling of the pacifists, but their stupidity.** My heart

is with them, but my mind has a contempt for them. **I want peace, but I know how to get it, and they do not.**

You will notice that I sent a friend of mine, Col. House, to Europe, who is as great a lover of peace as any man in the world, but I didn't send him on a peace mission yet. I sent him to take part in a conference as to how the war was to be won, and he knows, as I know, that that is the way to get peace if you want it for more than a few minutes.

PRODUCTION MUST BE INCREASED

All of this is a preface to the conference that I have referred to with regard to what we are going to do. If we are true friends of freedom of our own or anybody else's, we will see that **the power of this country and the productivity of this country is raised to its absolute maximum**, and that absolutely nobody is allowed to stand in the way of it. When I say that nobody is allowed to stand in the way I do not mean that they shall be prevented by the power of the Government but by the power of the American spirit. Our duty, if we are to do this great thing and show America to be what we believe her to be—the greatest hope and energy of the world—is to **stand together night and day until the job is finished.**

LABOR MUST BE FREE

While we are fighting for freedom we must see, among other things, that labor is free, and that means a number of interesting things. It means not only that we must do what we have declared our purpose to do, see that the conditions of labor are not rendered more onerous by the war, but also that we shall see to it that the instrumentalities by which the conditions of labor are improved, are not blocked or checked. That we must do. That has been the matter about which I have taken pleasure in conferring from time to time with your president, Mr. Gompers; and if I may be permitted to do so, I want to express my admiration of his patriotic courage, his large vision, and his statesmanlike sense of what has to be done. I like to lay my mind alongside of a mind that knows how to pull in harness. The horses that kick over the traces will have to be put in corral.

Now, to stand together means that nobody must interrupt the processes of our energy if the interruption can possibly be avoided without the absolute invasion of freedom. To put it concretely, that means this: **Nobody** has a right to stop the processes of labor until all the methods of conciliation and settlement have been exhausted. And I

might as well say right here that I am not talking to you alone. You sometimes stop the courses of labor, but there are others who do the same; and I believe that I am speaking, not from my own experience only, but from the experience of others, when I say that you are reasonable in a larger number of cases than the capitalists. I am not saying these things to them personally yet, because I have not had a chance; but they have to be said, not in any spirit of criticism, but in order to clear the atmosphere and come down to business. Everybody on both sides has now got to transact business, and a settlement is never impossible when both sides want to do the square and right thing.

LABOR DISPUTES MUST BE SETTLED IN CONFERENCES

Moreover, a settlement is always hard to avoid when the parties can be brought face to face. I can differ from a man much more radically when he is not in the room than I can when he is in the room, because then the awkward thing is he can come back at me and answer what I say. It is always dangerous for a man to have the floor entirely to himself. Therefore, we must insist in every instance that the parties come into each other's presence and there discuss the issues

between them and not separately in places which have no communication with each other. I always like to remind myself of a delightful saying of an Englishman of the past generation, Charles Lamb. He stuttered a little bit, and once when he was with a group of friends he spoke very harshly of some man who was not present. One of his friends said: "Why, Charles, I didn't know that you knew so and so." "O-o-oh," he said, "I-I d-d-don't; I-I can't h-h-hate a m-m-man I-I know." There is a great deal of human nature, of very pleasant human nature, in the saying. It is hard to hate a man you know. I may admit, parenthetically, that there are some politicians whose methods I do not at all believe in, but they are jolly good fellows, and if they only would not talk the wrong kind of politics, I would love to be with them.

NO SYMPATHY WITH MOB SPIRIT

So it is all along the line, in serious matters and things less serious. We are all of the same clay and spirit, and we can get together if we desire to get together. Therefore, my counsel to you is this: **Let us show ourselves Americans by showing that we do not want to go off in separate camps or groups by ourselves, but that we want to co-operate with all other classes and all other groups in the com-**

mon enterprise which is to release the spirits of the world from bondage. I would be willing to set that up as the final test of an American. That is the meaning of democracy. I have been very much distressed, my fellow citizens, by some of the things that have happened recently. The mob spirit is displaying itself here and there in this country. I have no sympathy with what some men are saying, but I have no sympathy with the men who take their punishment into their own hands; and I want to say to every man who does join such a mob that I do not recognize him as worthy of the free institutions of the United States. There are some organizations in this country whose object is anarchy and the destruction of law, but I would not meet their efforts by making myself partner in destroying the law. I despise and hate their purposes as much as any man, but I respect the ancient processes of justice; and I would be too proud not to see them done justice, however wrong they are.

MUST OBEY COMMON COUNSEL

So I want to utter my earnest protest against any manifestation of the spirit of lawlessness anywhere or in any cause. Why, gentlemen, look what it means. We claim to be the greatest democratic people in the

world, and democracy means first of all that we can govern ourselves. If our men have not self-control, then they are not capable of that great thing which we call democratic government. A man who takes the law into his own hands is not the right man to co-operate in any formation or development of law and institutions, and some of the processes by which the struggle between capital and labor is carried on are processes that come very near to taking the law into your own hands. I do not mean for a moment to compare it with what I have just been speaking of, but I want you to see that they are mere gradations in this manifestation of the unwillingness to co-operate, and that the fundamental lesson of the whole situation is that we must not only take common counsel, but that we must yield to and obey common counsel. Not all of the instrumentalities for this are at hand. I am hopeful that in the very near future new instrumentalities may be organized by which we can see to it that various things that are now going on ought not to go on. There are various processes of the dilution of labor and the unnecessary substitution of labor and the bidding in distant markets and unfairly upsetting the whole competition of labor which ought not to go on. I mean now on the part of employers, and we must interject

into this some instrumentality of co-operation by which the fair thing will be done all around. I am hopeful that some such instrumentalities may be devised, but whether they are or not, we must use those that we have and upon every occasion where it is necessary have such an instrumentality originated upon that occasion.

So, my fellow citizens, the reason I came away from Washington is that I sometimes get lonely down there. There are so many people in Washington who know things that are not so, and there are so few people who know anything about what the people of the United States are thinking about. I have to come away and get reminded of the rest of the country. I have to come away and talk to men who are up against the real thing, and say to them, "I am with you if you are with me." And the only test of being with me is not to think about me personally at all, but merely to think of me as the expression for the time being of the power and dignity and hope of the United States.

PUBLICATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE

**Any Two Books Sent Free on Application
Except as Noted.**

Use Official Request Blanks When Available.

I. RED WHITE AND BLUE SERIES.

1. How the War Came to America.
2. National Service Handbook (15 cents).
3. The Battle Line of Democracy (15 cents).
4. President's Flag Day Address, with Evidence of Germany's Plans.
5. Conquest and Kultur.
6. German War Practices: Part I.
7. The War Cyclopedia (25 cents).
8. German War Practices: Part II.

II. WAR INFORMATION SERIES.

101. The War Message and the Facts Behind It.
102. The Nation in Arms.
103. The Government of Germany.
104. The Great War: From Spectator to Participant.
105. A War of Self-Defense.
106. American Loyalty. By American Citizens of German Descent.
107. German Translation of Number 6.
108. American Interest in Popular Government Abroad.
109. Home Reading Course for Citizen Soldiers.
110. First Session of the War Congress.

III. LOYALTY LEAFLETS.

201. Friendly Words to the Foreign Born.
202. The Prussian System.
203. Labor and the War. By President Wilson.

IV. OFFICIAL BULLETIN.

Subscription Price, \$5.00 per year.

Address

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION

10 Jackson Place,

Washington, D. C.

